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CHAPTER VIII

FERTILITY AND THE DRUM CULT

The setting of the sacred drums in a mystical cult—initiation into the secrets of the whistling ancestors—calendric observances connected with fecundity, masks, and mummeries.

794 BESIDES the girls' puberty ceremony and the circumcision of boys, there are other initiation ceremonies among the Lovedu. One is the *vyali* (often looked upon as the women's counterpart of circumcision because of its regimentation), contemporaneous with which is the boys' *vuhwera*, consisting largely of masked dancing; another is the *gomana* for men. These are closely interwoven with a fertility and rain cult which, because of its association with sacred drums, one may call the drum cult. Their educational object, never very strongly marked in Bantu initiation schools, pales into insignificance before the ceremonial. Indeed the *gomana* as a 'school' is only an aspect of *gomana* ceremonial as a whole, the primary function of which is to secure rain. The *vyali-vuhwera-gomana* complex is characterized by esoteric masks, mummeries, and mysteries and by a category of values which we may term the 'mystical philosophy' of the Lovedu. We shall give merely a brief picture of the complex, because, at the time of writing, the first *vyali-vuhwera* held for thirty-five years is still in progress and our ideas as to its true meaning are far from being settled.

794 The sacred drum cult has many ramifications. The *zwidjajani*, sup-
●796 posed to be ancestral spirits coming to earth to take part in *gomana* singing and drumming of the sacred drums, have become incorporated into other aspects of the culture. They appear in the bush near the village whenever a harvest offering has been made in the families of royal relatives; they come at the installation of a new district head and at the [533] death of close relatives of the queen. On these occasions they join in the singing and dancing of *lesugu* songs, songs associated with the *vyali* of men and which, in addition to the above-mentioned occasions, are employed also when women dance for rain. The type of instrument by [772] means of which the *zwidjajani* whistle or bleat out their songs and messages is used also by the Bird, the ruling spirit of the *vyali*.

534 Drums are much used in Lovedu life; they are played in the *gɔsha*
778 dance to the accompaniment of reed pipes, they are important in all initiations except circumcision, they are beaten for days at the dancing of possessed people, and it is significant that the public recognition by the queen of a new district head at his installation consists in the handing over of a drumstick (*khiɔba kha gɔma*). Drums are of two types: the long cylindrical drum played with the hands as it lies on its side and the *gɔma*, a rounded drum with handles, played by means of a drumstick as it stands in an upright position. The sacred drums (*digomana*) of the tribe are of the *gɔma* type, but, unlike ordinary *gɔma* drums, are played by hand, not with a drumstick. They are four in number, each with its special

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services to a chief, residents must also build his village and mend his huts. These privileges and obligations are not merely theoretical; they are very much in evidence and can be observed to-day in the districts as much as, if not more than, at the capital. The first edible termites found in the district must, in the case of some of the more important heads, be brought to the district head; these ants are ritually associated with rain-making and are put into the rain pots which these heads have.

The national 'schools' are sometimes held independently by district heads; in 'biting' the first fruits (*hu luma*) and in turning the first soil, the precedence of the queen is hardly recognized. The head at Ḍaja and the senior male line of the royal family have theoretical precedence in *hu luma* and, in contrast to many neighbouring tribes, there is little stress upon having the queen's field hoed first; in practice to-day her field is never ploughed first. Maunadala, it is said, in the old days paid an ox to anticipate the queen's hoeing and thus avoided threatening starvation; but dispensations of this nature, while recognizing a theoretical rule, throw into relief the much greater autonomy of the district here than elsewhere. The district head is solely responsible for *hu upa*, the rite that drives away destructive birds and monkeys when crops are ripe; to him the death of every resident is reported (the report being transmitted to the queen only when a relative of hers dies) and the resulting 'holiday' is held only in the district. Each district head has his own drums through which he controls dancing (*gɔsha*), religious observances, and some of the 'schools'. The girls' puberty rite (*khɔba*) is entirely district-controlled.

The individuality of some districts is seen in esoteric customs; elsewhere by taboo, succession ceremonial, and a distinctive community life. At Khiobeni people may construct on the edge of the village a rain-shelter (*kwado*) in which fire is made; in neighbouring areas this is taboo. Work on the day following the new moon is said to have been taboo in the old days at Matsui, though the rule is never observed to-day; in neighbouring areas there never was such a holiday. The Thɔvɔla in one district have a special dance with a special ritual. As regards succession, the queen usually merely confirms, though she maintains touch through an elaborate ceremony: she is notified of the death of the head, sends the 'mother' of the district to take part in the ceremony of installation and, in the case of heads of the royal group, the *ɜwiɖajani* appear. The ceremonial, however, more intimately concerns the district: there is a local 'holiday' after the death, the *gɔsha* dance is taboo for a year, girls undergo puberty initiation elsewhere, beer is made by the district to 'open the drums', and each head of a family sends a goat or ros., 'the eye of the chief', to acknowledge their new head. The life of the district is often distinctive. Matsui is said to be wasteful and, according to one of their praises, people there, instead of stamping, for which they are too lazy, 'burn their finger-nails roasting green mealies'. Everything is rather slack and happy-go-lucky, beer drinks are apt to be unruly, the district head is at loggerheads with his uncles, and his subjects talk disparagingly of 'this district-head business of going about and drinking beer'. Bacchanalian orgies after the harvest, slack morals, and other irregularities at Matsui contrast strikingly with conditions at Bagoni, an adjacent district. At Bagoni there is a tradition

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the initiates. It is something mystically powerful which transforms boys into men. But if the initiation as a whole is a *gɔma*, so also are the secret formulae, objects, and mummeries that form part of the ceremony.

With the *vyali-vuhwera* fertility cult, which is at the same time also an initiation for girls (*vyali*) and for boys (*vuhwera*), are associated many *digɔma*, in the form of masked figures in costumes made of grass, reeds, and leaves, or plays and mummeries emphasizing the value of certain foods. But the greatest of all is *Khiudogane*, Bird of Muhale (the royal founder ancestor), ruling spirit of the *vyali*, which is believed to emerge from a pool on moonlight nights, leave mists behind it when it departs, and upon which much of the ritual centres. It is the link between two aspects of sacred forces, that conceived as mysterious, fearful, approached only through elaborate symbolism, and that represented by ancestors and directly approached. For the bird is both a great *gɔma* and a symbol of the royal ancestors.

Revived in 1938, after an interval of twenty years, the *vyali-vuhwera* with its great *digɔma* is thought to promote abundance and rain, the welfare and happiness of the people. While it lasts it is the main national interest to which all energies are bent and all activities subordinated. Marriages are held up, the normal judicial machinery is at a standstill, and anything that might compete with the ceremonial is interdicted. Since initiates spend only early mornings and evenings at the secret enclosure, they sleep at home and are able to carry on essential domestic tasks for the greater part of the day.

The sacred drums of the tribe (*digɔma*), four in number, are kept and cared for by the people of Ravothata, a lineage that came from Phalaborwa, where the drum cult is more intimately connected with the chief than among the Lovedu. These drums, which are said to contain under the resonator a human skull and, in the case of the smallest, the facial skin of a councillor, are mystically linked with the life of the queen and the welfare of the tribe. The heir sits on the smallest drum while being taught the rain ritual and it must accompany the queen if ever she is forced to flee from her enemies. The sacred drums are spoken of as *vadimo* (gods) as well as *digɔma*, and they were beaten twice a year in the old days in a ceremony known as *gɔmana* as an appeal to the ancestors for rain and to thank them for the harvest. The latter took the form of an initiation into the secrets of the cult at which boys were given certain cuts on their faces.

Associated with the sacred drums and also classed as *digɔma* are the *zwidajani*, the weird whistling ancestor spirits of the royal lineage who come to earth in the guise, it is said, of half-men with one eye, one arm, and one leg, to take part in the rites connected with the sacred drums and in the annual harvest *thugula* ceremony in all royal and certain other lineages. They are, in fact, as is known to those initiated in the *gɔmana*, old men masquerading as spirits. They appear in the bush near the village and join in the singing of *lesugu* songs which are sung, on these occasions, through specially constructed secret whistles.